

## Historic D.C. Courthouse Re-Dedicated

### Business

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Judges, lawyers, politicians and members of the community gathered to celebrate the re-dedication of the historic D.C. Courthouse in the heart of Judiciary Square in Northwest on Wed., June 17. The renovated building now serves as the new home for the D.C. Court of Appeals, the highest court of the District of Columbia.

Although, this is the second major renovation of the celebrated building on E Street, poor maintenance eventually took its toll and caused the building to be shuttered a decade ago.

D.C. Court of Appeals Chief Judge Eric T. Washington recalled the dire condition of the building in the mid-1980s during the re-dedication ceremony.

"The building was in bad shape. Windows had to be left open because there was no way to cool the building in the summer. Pigeons would fly in during trials. The building was full of asbestos and part of the ceiling was falling [down]," Washington said.

The courthouse was closed in 1999 and remained vacant until May 1 of this year when it re-opened to the public with a new look.

Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), on hand for the ceremony, said that she was relieved when she learned that the building would be restored as a courthouse and not a museum.

"The fact that it has been brought back to life to do what it was intended, is most gratifying," Norton said. "Any member of Congress coming in here would find what you've done well worth every penny."

The new and improved courthouse features several permanent displays that outline the history of the District of Columbia and the building. Erected in 1820, it originally served as the City Hall, the courthouse and also housed administrative offices. The building played a key role in African American history.

The trial of Daniel Drayton, an abolitionist who orchestrated the largest recorded escape attempt by slaves in United States history, took place in the courthouse. In 1848, Drayton enlisted the assistance of the owner and captain of the Pearl to sail 77 slaves north to freedom. However, unfavorable wind conditions allowed slave owners to catch-up with the boat and recapture the slaves. Drayton and his two accomplices were found guilty and sentenced to prison, but were eventually pardoned by President Millard Fillmore. The case was instrumental in the courthouse being named part of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the D.C. Compensated Emancipation Act in the courthouse, which granted freedom to slaves in the District. Abolitionist Fredrick Douglass had an administrative office in the courthouse while serving as a U.S. Marshall. The current U.S. Attorney General, Eric T. Holder, served as an Associate Judge of the D.C. Superior Court from 1988 to 1993.

"Eric Holder had his first chambers in this building," Washington said during the ceremony that attracted 300 guests. "All of the history is so fascinating. This court has witnessed all of that history."

Retired D.C. Court of Appeals Chief Judge Annice M. Wagner was instrumental in obtaining the funding from Congress to restore the building. Wagner, also present for the re-dedication ceremonies, recalled a time when a member of Congress showed-up at the courthouse to see the condition of the building. The building was dilapidated and falling apart.

"Dust began to fall from the ceiling, and then a critter, a squirrel, scampered across the floor," Wagner said. Funding was granted shortly afterwards.

The design firm of Beyer Blinder Bell Architects & Planners LLP, headquartered in New York, was hired to spearhead the \$100 million renovation.

D.C. Councilmember Phil Mendelson (D-At Large), presented a ceremonial resolution passed by the D.C. Council to celebrate the re-dedication.

"Our public buildings are important. They are a symbol of how we feel about our government," Mendelson said to the audience.

Charles Willoughby, Jr., 31, program director of the Washington Development Council, sees the new courthouse as a benchmark.

"The first thing that stands out [about the D.C. historic courthouse] is the symbolism. Lincoln signed the D.C. Emancipation Act there. As a native Washingtonian, the building has significance," he said. "As a Black professional, it shows how far we've come since that date."

He said that he was also impressed by the renovations — the building has character.

"I liked the fact that they were able to preserve the personality of the building. You may walk into the building and know that it is old, but it doesn't feel old," Willoughby said.



D.C. Court of Appeals Chief Judge Eric T. Washington was present at the re-dedication of the D.C. Courthouse on Wed., June 17 in Northwest. Courtesy Photo